



## spotlight on health care

### Toll-Free Medicare Helpline Marks 1st Anniversary

by Nancy-Ann DeParle

(NAPS)—In its first year of operation, more than 1.5 million callers—Medicare beneficiaries and the people who help them with their health care decisions—have used the Medicare Choices Helpline.



DeParle

Established by the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) in 1999, the Helpline is available throughout the United States and is the only national toll-free phone line that provides up-to-date information about Medicare.

Callers tell us this service really helps them get answers to their questions about Medicare. They like the information they're getting, and they like having a wide range of options on how to get that information. They have also told us they like talking to a person who can answer their questions directly, and they want to be reassured that if they are happy with current coverage for their health care, they don't have to make any changes at all.

HCFA phased in its toll-free telephone line across the country between January and March 1999, and it became fully operational on April 1, 1999, six months ahead of schedule. Today, the Helpline averages about 75,000 calls every week. Most callers request information about the availability of managed care plans in their community, followed by requests for Medicare publications.

By calling 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227), you can speak with a customer service representative in English or Spanish, between the hours of 8 a.m. and

4:30 p.m., local time Monday through Friday, to get general information about Medicare, as well as answers to your questions on:

- Medicare health plan options in your community, including original fee-for-service Medicare and, where available, managed care;
- specific quality and satisfaction information about available managed care plans;
- general information about Medicare supplemental insurance (Medigap); and
- telephone numbers for help with a variety of related issues, such as billing questions about Medicare claims, or for help with more complex questions about health insurance.

Callers with access to a teletypewriter (TTY) or telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) can call 1-877-486-2048.

The Helpline is just one place where you can get fast information about Medicare. You can also refer to the Medicare & You handbook, [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov) or hundreds of local and national organizations that work with seniors or disabled people.

Medicare is the nation's largest health insurance program and covers almost 40 million Americans over 65, and certain people with disabilities in original fee-for-service Medicare and the Medicare+Choice program. In fiscal year 1999, HCFA spent an estimated \$288 billion to finance health care services to elderly and disabled Americans in the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

*DeParle is the Administrator of the Health Care Financing Administration, which runs the Medicare program.*